



United States Department of Agriculture

Be a Biologist

Wild Winter Critters--Grouse!

Just the other day, I was walking on a trail in the Chippewa National Forest and all of a sudden, I heard a big “whoosh” sound right next to me! I jumped about a foot, and then realized it was a grouse! They have big wide cupped wings and so when they take off to fly, their wings make that “whoosh—thump thump thump” sound.

Grouse are active throughout the year. In the winter, I often see them in the cedars and crabapple trees, picking off the seeds, buds and berries. I am always amazed at how they balance themselves on the tiniest of branches in order to get lunch.

Grouse really know how to insulate themselves against the cold. On average, a grouse weighs less than two pounds, but they can really puff up their feathers to stay warm on a winter day. All fluffed up, they look like bowling balls! It’s amazing!

In northern Minnesota, grouse roost at night by burying themselves in snowdrifts. The light fluffy snow acts like even more insulation. Remember what happened to me on the hiking trail? In the winter, cross-country skiers sometimes scare up grouse from their snow roost. Imagine a grouse bursting out of the snow in front of you! Watch for feather marks on the snow next time you are out. If you see the marks in the snow, that spot may have been a little bed for a grouse.

Ruffed grouse also have little spurs off the sides of their toes in the winter. Biologists believe these little combs act like snowshoes to help the grouse walk across snow.

Grouse are great at camouflage. They are marbled brown, black and white and blend easily in the trees. Keep your eyes open, and listen carefully for that deep flight sound. Whoosh---thump thump thump.



Chippewa National Forest

